The city of Kingston in Ontario, Canada is celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Sir John Alexander Macdonald on January 11th, 2015. Macdonald’s family immigrated to Kingston in 1820. They made the city their hometown. Macdonald studied in Kingston schools, apprenticed and practiced law in the city. He was elected as an alderman in the City Council and represented the conservative party for the city of Kingston in the national elections of Canada. His body was buried next to his wife in Kingston.

The bicentennial festivities are to commemorate the important role which Macdonald played in the history of Kingston and Canada. Some aspects of the preparations are already underway. It is predicted that “nearly all Canadians will toast their nation’s founder, no doubt with appropriate spirits. The party has already begun with John A. Macdonald Walking Tours in Kingston and a campus speaking tours”. Commissions and committees are setup to oversee the celebrations and Queen’s University alumni in Kingston is organizing a variety of events to mark the occasion.

Sir John A. Macdonald, Leader of the Conservative party, was the first elected Prime Minister of Canada. The British North America Act of 1867 issued by the British Parliament granted the Province of Canada self-rule and named it the Dominion of Canada. The Dominion retained strong ties with Britain and its official flag was that of the British Union Jack. It was not until 1964 when Prime Minister Lester Pearson of the Liberal Party of Canada honoured his election pledge to change the Union Jack flag to Canada’s own official national flag - the Maple leaf. The pledge did not receive much support from the Empire loyalists who fought it during lengthy debates in Parliament. The majority voted for the national flag and the Maple Leaf came into being in 1965.

In 1982, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Leader of the Liberal party, was the Prime Minister who repatriated the Canadian Constitution. By then, Canada established its own supreme court and the highest court of appeal. It controlled its own destiny but remained a member in the British Commonwealth.
To some Canadian historians and biographers, Macdonald was hailed as a Canadian nation builder who made Canada a separate and an independent nation in British North America. He stood fast against the continued threat of annexation and attempts by the US to invade Canada and take over all of North America. To others, his greatness was tarnished by some of his cabinet policy decisions against the native Indians who rebelled in Western Canada. The needs and aspirations of the native Indians (Aborigines) were neglected. The native Indians had no say in shaping the future of Canada.

He was labeled by his political opponents as a drunk who was under the influence of alcohol even during Assembly Council sessions. He was accused of strengthening ties with Britain rather with the neighbor to the South.

In 1891, he proclaimed that “a British subject I was born, a British subject I will die”.

Although he was not born in Canada, he left behind a legacy for Canadian historians to unravel and examine how he shaped the country.

Born to Scottish parents, John immigrated with his family to Kingston from Glasgow in 1820. He was 5 years old and the third of five children.

At the time of the family’s arrival, Western colonies of Upper Canada were colonized by the British. The Eastern colonies of Lower Canada were colonized by the French, but were lost to Britain after the Seven Year’s war (1756-1763) and the treaty of Paris.

The part which was under the British was called Upper Canada which included the town of Kingston, Ontario. Upper Canada was established as a Province by the British in 1791. It accommodated British Empire loyalist refugees from the United States who fled the American Revolution.

Faced with his father’s unsuccessful business ventures and a disinterest in business, he started work after leaving school at the age of 15 years old. He wanted to earn money to support the family. "I had no boyhood," he complained many years later. "From the age of 15, I began to earn my own living."  

The family chose law as a career for their son John. He sat and passed law examinations of the Law Society of Upper Canada in Toronto. At the time in 1830, there were no Law schools in British North America. He became an apprentice in a Scottish law office and articled with a well known lawyer in Kingston. Though unqualified, he
practiced law at an early age. He was running a law office in 1835 and was called to the bar in 1836. He sought legal prominence and was described by Canadian biographers as shrewd, charming, intelligent, innovative, charismatic and clever politician. He sought power and wanted to keep it. He joined many organizations and made sure that he was known to the people of Kingston. He accepted crime cases which made him famous and well known in the community.

"As a criminal lawyer who took on dramatic cases, Macdonald got himself noticed well beyond the narrow confines of the Kingston business community. He was operating now in the arena where he would spend by far the greatest part of his life --- the court of public opinion. And, while there, he was learning the arts of argument and of persuasion that would serve him all his political life."5

"By 1838, Macdonald's position was secure. He was a public figure, a popular young man, and a senior lawyer."6

The British Parliament merged Upper and Lower Canada in 1841. The newly formed entity was called the Province of Canada. It formed one Legislative Assembly rather than the two for the two colonies. Kingston was chosen the first capital site for the union from 1841-1844.

Kingston was established in 1673 and is the oldest city in the Province of Ontario. It was originally called Cataracqui by the French settlers who built Cataracqui Fort and traded in fur with the native Indians in 1673. But, the French settlement was captured by the British and France ceded her North American colonies to Britain after its defeat in the Seven Year’s War in 1756-1763. The demography of the settlement changed as more and more United British Empire loyalists flocked into the town. English settlers referred to it in 1787 as King’s Town in honour of King George III. The name was eventually shortened to Kingston in 1788.

Today Kingston houses the home of the first Prime Minister John A. Macdonald. The Site is administered by Parks Canada and called Bellevue House. It is declared as a Canadian National Historic Site.

The young John A. Macdonald entered politics as an alderman in Kingston City Council elections in 1843. He won the votes by 156 against 43 for his opponent. In 1844, he was asked by businessmen to lead the Conservative Party and represent Kingston in the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada. In 1844. He won the seat for
Kingston. The Legislative Assembly was moved from Kingston to Montreal to Toronto and later to Ottawa by a decree from Queen Victoria of the British North America. There were several factors for such moves namely, the mounting resentment by the French speaking majority in Lower Canada (Quebec), the lack of space in buildings in Kingston, the shortage of revenues from taxes and the criticism of the famous author Charles Dickens. Macdonald continued his political advancement. In 1846, he was appointed as Queen’s Council and in the same year he declined a position of Solicitor General. However, he accepted in 1847 a government appointment of Receiver General. During the elections of 1847-1848, He retained his Kingston seat for the Conservative party but lost his government post as a result of the resignation of the government. It was not until 1854 when a coalition government of Liberals and Conservatives was formed to govern the Province of Canada. He was appointed Attorney General. In 1856, he became the leader of the Conservative party in Upper Canada (Canada West). In July 1857 he left Canada for Britain to promote projects with the British government. Upon his return he won the general elections and was appointed Prime Minister. There was a lot of rivalry between the political parties, namely the Liberals and Conservatives in Upper Canada (West) and the French parties in Lower Canada (East). Each party sought to bring down each other’s government. As the parties resolved their differences, a conference was called by the British Colonial Office to be convened in the colony of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island in 1864. The conference was to discuss the union of the British North American colonies. It included the Province of Canada (Upper and Lower), the Maritime Provinces (Nova Scotia and New Brunswick). Proposals were drafted and a further conference followed in Quebec City (Lower Canada) in which Macdonald was the main proponent of confederation. What hastened the formation of the union was the constant fear from US invasion of Canada after the War of Independence and the attacks which were instigated by the Fenian men (Irish American fighters) who opposed the British rule in Ireland.

In 1866, Macdonald led a delegation to a London Conference in Britain. In 1867, the British government proclaimed self rule for the colonies and named it the Dominion of Canada. The bill separated Western Canada which became the Province of Ontario and Eastern Canada which became the Province of Quebec. Macdonald was decorated a knight by the British monarchy.

With the increased fear from the frequent American skirmishes along the border and to combat the fall of British Hudson Bay Company and other British American colonies in the Midwest and west of Canada into the hands of the Americans, Macdonald pursued his diplomatic means to convince the British Colonies to join a united Canada. He made a counter offer to buy the Hudson
Bay Company and its land assets, seduced British Colombia and the rest of the Maritime Provinces in the East with the promise to open up its borders with the rest of Canada by building a transcontinental railway for the exchange of goods and services.


"He not only helped to create Canada, but contributed immeasurably to its character." ⑧

In addition to his accomplishment in creating and shaping the union of Canada, he was instrumental in establishing the Canadian Pacific Railway which linked east Atlantic Canada with west Pacific Canada. He played a supporting role in founding Queen’s University in Kingston in 1839, and was the first national leader in the world to try to extend the vote to women in 1885. He founded the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in western Canada in 1873. He negotiated with the Americans the trade agreements and the demarcation of the border between the two countries.

Canadian authors and biographers acknowledge the fact that Macdonald was not only one of the main architects of the union of Canada but was the savior of Canada from being sold by the British to the US. "the US requested postwar compensation from Great Britain, even suggesting that such enormous loss could only be repaid by ceding Canada. This subsequently caused the bilateral relationship after the Civil War to reach its most precarious condition since the War of 1812." ⑨

John Boyko, a Canadian author and teacher of history said in the daily newspaper The Whig-Standard of Kingston, Ontario, "Britain was ready to give Canada to the United States for the reparation payments for the British involvement in the American Civil War, they were ready to trade us away," ⑩ Boyko said the Americans calculated that the British government owed them $125 million for their interference in the civil war. Britain didn't have the money at the time so they offered Canada instead.

Nevertheless, what the US probably did not achieve in annexing Canada through political and military means in the 1800s, it managed today to realize that through its free trade agreements with Canada and the economic power of its international
business corporations. It is estimated that Canada’s exports 70% of its resources to the US and many of the businesses in Canada are owned by big US corporations.

However, in all Macdonald’s negotiations with the British, the Americans or the other premiers of the provinces of Canada, he ignored to realize the political aspirations of the native Indians who were not invited or involved in negotiations which influenced their lives. Sir John A. Macdonald is blamed for passing in the Legislature of the Province of Canada the Gradual Civilization Act in 1857. The aim of the Act was to assimilate the native Indians into the English style and standard of living. Native Indians were perceived as pagans, savages and uncivilized. The Act was implemented in 1879. It established Residential schools run by churches. Native Indian male and female children were removed from their family environment to attend Residential schools. That occurred under John A. Macdonald government. "In 1884, bowing to pressure from churches, Ottawa passed an amendment to the Indian act making attendance mandatory at these schools. The legacy of Aboriginal policies had on the Aboriginal people was devastating and by 1907 the Montreal star, reports that 42% of children attending residential schools die before the age of 16 calling the situation a “national disgrace”. It is noteworthy that timeline of these policies of the residential school system continued well into the 1900’s, as recent as 1984.”11 "All the while, John A. Macdonald who served as Prime Minister, as well as Superintendent General of Indian affairs, suppressed the “Rebellion” in the Northwest, and with the policies of the day set the stage for the Indian Act. The residential school system designed to “take the Indian out of the child”.12

Sir John A. Macdonald is honored today by successive elected governments of Canada. His name and portrait are present on the Canadian ten dollar note, in history books, on streets and highways, in Parliament Hill in Ottawa and in public parks. He dedicated his entire life for a united free Canada. He was elected 7 times in Federal elections and served 19 years as Prime Minister of Canada. In May 1891 he suffered a stroke and was partially paralyzed in his office in Ottawa. A month later he died and his body was moved to Kingston, Ontario where he is buried.

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1 Ashraf Girgrah is a graduate of Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.


9 John Boyko, Whig Standard of Kingston, Ontario, Sir John A. Macdonald 'saved Canada'

10 Oxford Journals, Chinese Journal of International Politics (2006), http://cjip.oxfordjournals.org/content/1/1/83.full#xref-fn-33-1
